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The GCC and Iran Conflicts and Strategies of Confrontation

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INTRODUCTION

Relations between the Iranian regime and the Gulf states are currently witnessing a worsening of the state of chronic conflict, which has in reality lasted since the Iranian revolution in 1979 until the present since a primary goal of the regime is to export its “Islamic Revolution” regionally and internationally, with the Gulf states being the first target of this expansionism.

While the Gulf states had previously able to manage the conflict with Iran, preventing it from expanding beyond its own boundaries, recent regional transformations, particularly in countries such as Syria, Iraq and Yemen, have provided another opportunity for Iran to extend its regional influence through its regional proxies, primarily non-state groups, which have sought to demolish and dismantle formerly unified nation-states, posing a direct threat to the Gulf states’ security.

This has led to a new phase of the Gulf-Iranian conflict, especially in light of the Gulf Cooperation Council’s (GCC) member states’ military intervention in Yemen in support of the legitimate government there, and the GCC’s and Arab League’s decision to brand Hezbollah as a terrorist organization, along with the stiff sentences imposed by the courts in some Gulf states against Hezbollah- and Tehran-linked individuals involved in espionage.

Based on these factors, this study aims to answer three primary questions:

1. What are the nature of and issues involved in the conflict between the Gulf States and Iran?
2. How has the Gulf managed the conflict with Iran?
3. What are the future scenarios for this conflict?

First: The concept and determinants of the regional conflict between the GCC and Iran:

Like other social phenomena, there are multiple possible definitions for the concept of conflict, with regional conflicts differing from international conflicts in a number of important ways; the main difference is that regional conflicts are geographically limited to and, to some degree, defined by the regions where they take place – the issues involved are specific to the region in question, whether these involve border disputes, struggles for regional influence, or disputes over water or other natural resources. Generally regional conflicts are directly associated with the national security of the states involved, and are of an existential nature, with the primary factors of the conflict being the elements and pillars of the state's very existence, which lead such conflicts to be permanent and confrontational in nature unless and until they are decisively resolved in favor of one or the other of the states involved. In addition, in each stage of such a conflict, the strength of the adversaries will derive directly from the progress made in the previous stages, with the ultimate aim of all involved being the elimination of the adversary state.⁽¹⁾ With such conflicts having so many objectives, the need to maintain security during all the stages is one of the primary requirements and goals.

Proceeding from these points, one must recognize that the current regional conflict is taking place in a chaotic and uniquely insecure era, with no stable world order and no single power having the authority or ability to provide the aforementioned essential security. Thus, efforts by one of the parties involved to safeguard its own security will lead to concerns amongst its adversaries for their own security, resulting in both parties preparing themselves for a worst-case scenario, especially since attaining total security is an elusive objective. The competition between these adversaries, even in periods of calm, is inevitable and leads ultimately to a permanent and mutual state of chronic insecurity, with each step by each party being considered a direct threat requiring military retaliation by the other.⁽²⁾

The primary determinants of regional conflicts are generally geographical location and population, which are reflected in the power of the state, as well as the nature of the political system and the orientations of the ruling elite. Applying the above to the Gulf-Iranian conflict, we find that the essence of the conflict is the Iranian regime's lack of interest in living harmoniously with its neighboring states in a positive regional environment as provided for in international treaties on good neighborliness and non-interference in the internal affairs of states and respect for their sovereignty. The Iranian regime's militaristic adversarial politics clash with the conservative policies of the Gulf States, with Iran depending in its conflict with the Gulf states on what this researcher would define as "tripartite military strength, geographical location, and sectarian factors."

1.1. At the level of military force, there is an imbalance in the balance of power between the Gulf states and Iran. In accordance with the relevant political literature, the balance of power is achieved when any state or group of states lacks sufficient strength to dominate the region and force the other regional nations into submission to its will. In the absence of such a balance, the dominant state will use its abilities to exercise the coercion and subjugation of its adversaries, whose peoples are then driven to defy that rogue antagonistic power.⁽³⁾ This formula can be applied to the Gulf states and Iran; we find that there is an imbalance between them, according to the annual report of the International Institute for Strategic Studies for 2015, which stated that the Gulf States' military forces totaled 368,100 troops, as follows: Saudi Arabia 227 000, Oman 42, 600 United Arab Emirates 63 000, Kuwait 15 500, Qatar 11,800, and Bahrain 8,200. Iran's armed forces, meanwhile, total 475,000, including 350,000 active military serving troops and 125,000 Iranian Revolutionary Guards.⁽⁴⁾ Some Gulf States may have superiority over Iran for certain types of weapons, such as the UAE's Air Force. The previous figures, however, demonstrate the massive gap in the number of serving soldiers, a natural reflection of the vast difference in population sizes; Iran's population of 80 million is more than twice the populations of all the Gulf States combined,⁽⁵⁾ which currently stands at 47.4 million, though this figure includes both citizens and expatriate residents.⁽⁶⁾

The absence of a balance of power further reinforces Iran's concept of itself as a "leader state", which seeks to dominate the Gulf region to achieve the status of a so-called "Gulf Policeman". This pushes the Gulf States into confronting this attempt

to dominate the region in order to maintain the regional balance of powers which lasted throughout the 80-plus years between the fall the Ottoman Empire in 1918 and the US invasion of Iraq in 2003 that led to a current massive imbalance in the regional balance of power.⁽⁷⁾

1.2. In terms of geographical location, the Gulf region represents the heart of the Middle East geographically; crossing it overland or via the Euphrates River, one can reach Syria and the Mediterranean Sea or Turkey and the Black Sea through the Tigris River or to Iran and the Caspian Sea and from there to Russia through natural crossings, or even to Afghanistan.

Within this region, Iran enjoys strategic advantages as a continental bridge linking the Arabian Peninsula, China, India, Southeast Asia and the area around the Hormuz Strait, through which Gulf oil is exported to the countries of the world.⁽⁸⁾

The quantity of oil that passes through the Hormuz Strait daily is generally estimated at around 17 million barrels per day, equivalent to 30% of the total amount of oil transported nautically⁽⁹⁾ and controlled by Iran from the north and east and from the south by the Sultanate of Oman. More especially in light of the continued Iranian occupation of the three UAE islands, the Iranian regime now controls the Hormuz Strait completely.

1.3. In the context of the sectarian dimension, meanwhile, given the theocratic nature of the political system and the orientations of the ruling elite, directly reflected in the State's foreign policy, Iran's regime is witnessing an internal struggle between the concepts of state and revolution for dominance. By analyzing Gulf-Iranian relations from 1979 up to 2016, we find that the issue of Iran's self-identification was strongly framed within the Iranian vision of itself in terms of its neighbors and of the Gulf States.

Iran considers itself the 'Shiite Island' amid the 'Sunni ocean', an 'ocean', which has never been an asset to it in its modern incarnation, a point underlined by the 1980-88 Iran-Iraq war on the one hand and by the longstanding conflict between the regime and the West on the other. Concerning its theoretical conflict with the West, Iran believes that the Gulf States are currently at their weakest, enabling the Iranian regime to impact the regional interests of Western nations through pressuring the Arab Gulf. To this end, Iran is pursuing a dual policy, adopting a strategy of "cooperative security" towards Asian countries through trade agreements and economic relations, in stark contrast to its "hard security" policy

shown towards Gulf nations through continuous interference in their internal affairs, and through occupying three UAE islands and threatening to close the Hormuz Strait.

The regime is also introducing initiatives aimed not at achieving the security of Arab Gulf but rather at achieving Iran's expansionist project of regional domination.⁽¹⁰⁾ It should be emphasized that Iranian policy in this regard is not temporary, but is part of the nature and identity of the Iranian political system, embodied by the drafters of the Iranian constitution, who wanted to institutionalize the concept of "Islamic Revolution" itself; as a result, "Exporting the Revolution" is a core concept within the constitution. Initially, a struggle raged between Khomeini, who embraced the concept of institutionalizing the creed of the Jurist Leadership (a heavily fundamentalist Guardianship/Rule of the Jurists (Mullas) and Mahdi Bazargan, whose wide support base included both liberals and Islamists, who wished to model the Iranian constitution along the lines of the French Constitution of Charles de Gaulle's Fifth Republic so that Iran would be "Islamic" in terms of its name and democratic in terms of content.

However, the majority supported Khomeini's version when a fateful referendum on the constitution was held, with 99% of the voters choosing his form of the Iranian Republic. It should be noted that 20 million voters out of a total electorate of 21 million participated in that referendum.⁽¹¹⁾

Iran has never stopped its efforts to export its (heavily sectarian) revolution to the Gulf States, via different methods at different historical stages, including the attempted assassination of the Emir of Kuwait in the 1980s by a member of the Tehran-backed Iraqi Dawa Party.

While Iranian President Hashemi Rafsanjani's opinion was that the revolution would be exported forcibly only be exported by force, in the era of President Mohammad Khatami the export of the revolution was repackaged and garnished with concepts such as dialogue and good neighborliness.

Under President Ahmadinejad, the Iranian regime began marketing itself as the defender of the oppressed peoples of the earth. Only in the wake of the election of Obama's "moderate reformist" favorite, President Hassan Rouhani did Iranian intervention in the affairs of neighboring countries Iraq, Syria, Yemen, and Lebanon become explicit and brutal; along with the military interventions and support of proxies in those countries, many Hezbollah and Iranian regime espionage cells have been uncovered in some Gulf States.⁽¹²⁾

Second: Gulf-Iranian conflict issues:

2.1. The borders:

At the forefront of border issues in the Gulf region is Iran's occupation of three islands - Abu Musa and the Greater and Lesser Tunbs - belonging to the UAE. All of the legal and historical evidence confirms that these islands are owned by the United Arab Emirates with no counter-argument based on legal valid principles and convincing, compelling evidence presented by the Iranian occupiers; this lack of any convincing argument to support its claims explains Iran's refusal to refer the case to an international court for arbitration.

Despite the islands' small size, they have massive strategic importance, given their position in the narrow stretch of the Arabian Gulf leading to the Hormuz Strait and then towards the Gulf of Oman, with most of the Gulf's oil exports and non-oil imports passing through this route.

There are also ongoing disputes over ownership of the sites of a number of offshore oil and gas fields in the Arabian Gulf, including a dispute between Kuwait and Iran over the Dura oilfield, a roughly triangular area of the Gulf, most of which is located in the coastal area between Kuwait and Saudi Arabia. Whilst Iran, Kuwait and Saudi Arabia reached a supposedly binding agreement on their maritime borders in 2000, the Iranian regime has escalated the dispute with Kuwait over the Dura field by introducing two projects for foreign companies to develop the oilfield for Iran, ignoring Kuwait's objections, the oilfield's location and the delineation of the continental shelf in the waters of the Gulf between the two countries. Tehran's actions prompted the Kuwaiti Ministry of Foreign Affairs to summon the Iranian Charge d'Affaires in Kuwait and deliver a letter of protest concerning these moves. ⁽¹³⁾ While noting that Iran has been the instigator of these problems, Kuwait is keen on the peaceful resolution of such disputes. In this context, we should also note the announcement by the spokesperson of the Iranian Shura Council's National Security and Foreign Policy Commission, Nowzar Shafiei, in which he announced "the end of the problems relating to the demarcation of the maritime border with the Sultanate of Oman." The Iranian regime aims to use the Sultanate of Oman as a transit point in the Gulf for Iranian companies targeting the African and Asian markets after the lifting of international sanctions. ⁽¹⁴⁾

2.2. Regional Role:

According to the standard geopolitical model put forward by David Myers, the inability of the major powers to exert full control over the world's regions has provided an opportunity for regional countries to exercise hegemonic aspirations, which formerly remained within the geographical boundaries. According to Myers' model, these powers fall into three categories, first, there is the prominent regional state, which dominates or aspires to dominate and which has or is in the process of acquiring sufficient power to control the region – in this case, this is Iran. The second power in this model is the compromising or interventionist forces, in this case, "all the Western powers that have substantial interests in the Gulf region," and which possess both sufficient force to make the dominant or would-be hegemonic power's expansionist efforts prohibitively costly to it, and the power both to bargain and to exert the same or greater military force than that of the dominant force.

The third category in this model is the balancing power such as the Gulf States, powerful existing forces within the regional system that are often co-opted by one or both of the other two aforementioned powers, therefore holding the balance in the regional system largely on the strength of their abilities.⁽¹⁵⁾

While it should be acknowledged that this theory has formulated regional and international interactions across different historical periods, following the signing of the nuclear agreement in July 2015 and the consequent accord between the US and Iran, Washington chose to overlook the Iranian regime's hostile policies toward the Gulf states. This meant that there is a change in the criteria of this geopolitical theory model, with the objectives of both the dominant and interventionist powers dovetailing, posing existential challenges for the Arab Gulf States, with Iran seeking to exercise a regional role far beyond the basic principles stipulated by international conventions. It should be emphasized that the Gulf States do not oppose Iran playing a regional role, but feel that such a role should be based on trust and measures between the two sides, particularly through ending the gap between words and deeds, and more importantly introducing real Iranian initiatives to end the outstanding issues with the Gulf States.⁽¹⁶⁾

Iran has been able to exploit regional developments to enhance its regional influence through two separate phases:

The first phase, after 1990, saw regional security become a primary determinant in the structure of global security in a manner markedly different to previous

historical epochs, thus Iran has been able to achieve **the first** of three objectives, namely continuing to intervene in the affairs of regional neighboring countries to such an extent that Iran has become both a key part of the problem and part of the solution simultaneously. **The second** is in Iran's learning from the experience of Iraq with the international community in disputes over weapons of mass destruction, with Iran not reaching the edge of the abyss as Saddam did, either with the International Atomic Energy Agency or with the United States. **Thirdly**, Iran has deployed its oil and gas resources to build and enhance excellent relations with Asian countries, including Russia, despite international sanctions previously imposed by the international community.⁽¹⁷⁾

The second phase, post-2011 with the transformations and various developments of the Arab Spring and the aftermath, marked a fundamental shift in the rules of the game and the regional balance of power, both in changing regimes in some Arab countries or in the emergence of armed groups without the state seeking to break up the unified national state sovereignty and igniting large-scale conflict in Arab countries. This has paved the way for Iran to develop political strategies to fill the regional void, whether relying on soft power through "attempts to influence the Shiites" in the Gulf States, or "hard power" in relying on the Revolutionary Guards in promoting Iran's regional role by open and systematic forms of support for the Syrian regime. These Iranian policies, however, including the incitement of sectarianism and raising the possible spectra of dividing or breaking up Syria, will ultimately lead to major domestic problems and pose a grave threat to Iran's own national security in light of the enforced homogeneity of Iranian society itself, with Iran being comprised of different ethnic groups.⁽¹⁸⁾

Iran's massively destructive regional policies have led not only to tension at the official and diplomatic level but also to the emergence of a popular backlash against the Iranian regime amongst the Gulf and wider Arab public. This was reflected in a 2015 survey of 860 prominent individuals representing the Arab intellectual elite in 21 Arab countries, including the Gulf States. Conducted during a period following the signing of the nuclear deal between September 30 and November 30, 2015, the survey found that 89 percent of respondents rated Arab-Iranian political relations as generally bad, with 28 percent of this number categorizing relations as 'Very Bad' and 61 percent as simply 'Bad', while only eight percent of respondents categorized them as good and a measly one percent rated relations as 'Very Good'. Only three percent of those surveyed gave no answer to this question. On the

subject of regional security, 87 percent of respondents rated current levels as 'Bad' (with 43 percent categorizing the situation as 'Very Bad' and 44 percent as simply 'Bad'), with 10 percent rating regional security as 'Good' (and one percent amongst this number as 'Very Good'), while a further four percent gave no response.⁽¹⁹⁾

2.3. Conventional armament and the Iranian nuclear program

The US invasion of Iraq in 2003 was a turning point, not only for Iraq but also for the regional security of the Gulf, with the invasion inflicting a massive imbalance in the balance of power as the United States erroneously conflated the hostility of the Iraqi regime with that of the Iraqi state itself. With Iraq out of the regional balance equation and Iran's role massively strengthened, the Iranian regime nevertheless feared that it would probably be the next target after the overthrow of the former Iraqi regime.⁽²⁰⁾

It should be noted, however, that, even before this, the regime always believed that the development of conventional arms is a strategic necessity to maintain its theocratic rule:

A. Traditional Armament: In this context, we find that Iran attaches and devotes great importance to developing the traditional military forces; however, that has not meant absolute superiority over the Gulf. At a time when Iran occupies twenty-third place globally in terms of military power, we find that Saudi Arabia stands at number 28. Considering the total number of personnel in Iran's armed forces, however, it is unquestionable that Iran is militarily superior to all the other GCC countries combined. Iran also has a massively superior weapons arsenal, as well as possessing the fourth largest naval fleet in the world with 440 vessels. Iran also possesses the fourth largest submarine fleet globally, with 32, while the Gulf States have no submarines at all. On the other hand, however, the Gulf States are clearly superior to Iran in military air power, especially in possessing fourth generation American and British-made fighter aircraft. At a time when Iran is classified as the fourth most powerful country in the world in terms of missile development after the United States, Russia and China, we find that the Gulf States possess American missile batteries, which could repel ballistic missiles at a range between 50 and 100 km.⁽²¹⁾ It should also be noted that the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the UAE have gained the ability to design and modernize military vehicles, communications, and electrical systems and to carry out maintenance of its military arsenal, as well as implementing so-called "start" programs, which include the transfer of

defense technology, with both countries expected to occupy a privileged position among the top twenty global market for these programs by the beginning of the next decade. ⁽²²⁾

B. Conventional armament: given the murkiness and uncertainty surrounding Iran's nuclear program, the Gulf countries have justifiably raised fears and concerns for many reasons on this issue. As noted in a report from the US' Security and International Science Institute, prepared by David Albright, president of the Center for Science and Security, who has previously worked with the International Atomic Energy Agency, and Andrea Striker, a researcher who specializes in nuclear research, the United States has allowed secret loopholes and exemptions for Iran in the nuclear deal, with one of those gaps allowing Iran to keep some 300 km of low-enriched uranium at 20% in the form of solid waste, liquid waste and flammable waste without determining the amount exempted from that waste, ⁽²³⁾ taking into account the case of the Iran –America agreement which were expected to continue until after the results of the 2016 US presidential election. In addition to its entanglement in the complexity of regional developments, the nuclear deal goes beyond being a technical matter but is part of a regional system currently being shaped internationally to marginalize the role of the Gulf States, with Iran and the global powers battling to restructure the region. ⁽²⁴⁾ In addition, the Gulf States justifiably fear Iran's commitment to the implementation of the deal according to the agreed terms, especially given the possibility of changes within the domestic Iranian political environment, which could see the rise of more fundamentalist hard-liners in Iran. These fears are further magnified by the current debate over a successor to the present Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei in light of his failing health, with the transfer of power within the Iranian political system a complex equation with potentially massive impact on crucial decisions, or in terms of the continuing regional instability which pushes Iran to rethink the strategic value of nuclear weapons in terms of deterrence in the face of Iran's current or future perceptions of threat. ⁽²⁵⁾

Third, the Gulf States and managing conflict with Iran

3.1. Features of the regional and international geopolitical environment on Gulf-Iranian conflict:

On the level of the regional geopolitical environment, in the wake of the transformations shaking the Arab world since 2011 Iran began to exploit these

transformations to serve its expansionist agenda, whether by trying to fill the regional void or through the support of its regional armed militias in neighboring countries under the pretext of the 'War on Terror'. This regional expansionism has now reached an extent that the deputy representing Tehran city on the Iranian Shura Council, speaking about the regime's regional interventions, said, "Three Arab capitals are now in Iran's hands and affiliated to the Iranian revolution,"⁽²⁶⁾ adding that "Sanaa is the fourth capital which is on its way to join the Iranian revolution." The catastrophic situation in Syria is perhaps the most obvious demonstration of Iranian intervention, with the leadership in Iran believing that supporting Assad's regime is politically and ideologically crucial for Tehran.

Iran also views Syria as the only Arab country that supported the Tehran regime during the Iran-Iraq war, with various estimates of the number of Revolutionary Guard troops deployed in Syria up until April 2016, ranging between 6,500 and 9,200 troops with a monthly salary of between \$500 to \$1,000.⁽²⁷⁾

On the level of the international geopolitical environment, meanwhile, it is difficult to separate the content and direction of the Gulf-Iran conflict from Washington's vision of regional security issues generally. The United States still considers Iran to be a key regional player, while Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states see Iran as playing a wholly negative and subversive role, not only in wider regional issues but also within the depth of the Gulf itself, including through its extremist influence on the Shiite community in Bahrain and Saudi Arabia.

The concerns of the Gulf countries were further increased by the United States' failure to impose sanctions on Iran as a result of its ballistic missile tests in October 2015, just three months after the signing of the nuclear deal, despite such tests being a clear violation of UN Security Council Resolution 1929 on the nuclear deal itself and of the ban on Iran of undertaking such action of missile experiments of this kind.

Rather than allay these fears, White House spokesman Josh Earnest gave further reason for them, saying, "The United States will not be subject to pressure from any country to impose economic sanctions on Iran," and adding, "We know that this type of financial sanctions have an impact in facing Iran's ballistic missile program, but we will impose the sanctions at a time we choose."⁽²⁸⁾

Concerns have been raised about the possible existence of a secret agreement between the United States and Iran, which would allow Iran to operate outside the

control of IAEA as this agency has been permitted only to examining soil samples in Iran to assess Iran's nuclear efforts. Among the terms of the nuclear agreement, the United States also released massive sums of money, amounting to \$US 400 billion, which has been delivered to Iran in Euros as cash. This deal also included the release of a number of the American prisoners detained in Iran.

A core question that arises, if the nuclear deal was as strong as the White House claimed, why did the US administration resort to secret side deals? The answer is straightforward; Iran threatened to cancel the agreement if the economic sanctions were not immediately lifted, which was impossible to achieve within that time frame. ⁽²⁹⁾ Despite the eagerness of President Barack Obama to hold a summit with the Gulf States in Riyadh in April 2016 in the wake of the Camp David summit of 2015, with the intention of both summits being to reassure the Gulf states on the nuclear deal and its implications for the security of the Arabian Gulf, neither the 2015 or 2016 summit produced tangible results, either for the security of the Gulf in general or in terms of US commitments to deter Iran. It is also difficult to confidently predict any change in American politics in the wake of the 2016 presidential elections; if Hillary Clinton had won, the US would probably not have adopted any strict measures towards Iran, and even with Trump's victory his negative comments against the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia confirm the absence of radical change in future US policies toward the Kingdom or the Gulf region generally states.

Complaints about an "alliance" between the United States and the Gulf countries have been raised and used repeatedly by all the American elites and are a favorite trope of US media, both mainstream and 'alternative', more especially given the importance of the Gulf's relations with the US. However, the evidence actually confirms that the US' partnerships and alliances in the Middle East are founded with Turkey, Israel and NATO rather than Arab Gulf states. Genuine alliances should be based on a mutual defense treaty binding to all parties concerned, something, which the US has never realized or achieved with the Gulf States. This means that the precise characterization of that relationship is a temporary "partnership" rather than an "alliance" or "coalition", with the international intervention to liberate Kuwait from Iraqi occupation in 1991 unlikely to be repeated, and relations unlikely to return to that high point again, given the changing sources of risk and the lack of a defense pact committing the United States to intervene. ⁽³⁰⁾

All these factors mean that the United States must reconsider its relations with the Gulf countries by considering the introduction of new multilateral defense initiatives rather than a bilateral formula, i.e. Drawing up initiatives between the United States and the Gulf states collectively rather than as individual entities. Washington should also realize the critical importance of supporting the defense capabilities of the Gulf in the presence of international competitors in the region, including France and Russia. ⁽³¹⁾ On the other hand, whilst it may not be correct to claim that the age of hostilities between the United States and Iran has fully ended, the Iranian regime's regional expansion continues unabated, as the sanctions mechanism alone will be insufficient to deter Iran, given the leadership's eagerness to develop its economic relations with both China and Russia. These considerations mean that the USA needs to consider strategies to counteract this and to consider other mechanisms, placing an emphasis on the importance of rebuilding US-Saudi relations. ⁽³²⁾

While it's possible that the Trump administration won't resort to the use of military force in dealing with regional crises, especially while there is still public concern in the United States on US military interventions abroad, the United States should play a key role in achieving a regional balance of power; the greater the United States' desire to reduce the impact of the Iranian regime's regional activities the more partners it will have, not only in containing Iran's expansionism, but in dealing with terrorist groups, which are themselves often affiliated overtly or covertly with Tehran. ⁽³³⁾

On a related issue, Russia's entry into regional interactions in the wake of its military intervention in Syria in 2014 is an important variable within the overall regional conflict, whereby Iran may be seeking to instigate US-Russian conflict within the so-called "new Cold War" to strengthen its regional role. However, the extent of Iran's ability to take advantage of this new situation remains contingent on the vision of both the United States and Russia regarding the regional role of Iran; it is difficult to say that there is a shared Russo-American understanding of that role because there is a possibility that such a role would turn Iran into a regional power which threatens the strategic interests of both superpowers. It's possible, however, that both the United States and Russia will ultimately deal with the realities of the current situation concerning Iran by deeming the Iranian regime both part of the problem and part of the solution simultaneously, and agreeing on an optimum level for Iran's regional role so as not to threaten their own regional or international

interests. This new equation confirms the declining interest in the United States political establishment in the idea of overthrowing the Iranian regime, suggesting that the Obama administration's insistence on the signing of the nuclear agreement is consistent with Russia's vision of security in the Arabian Gulf region in general, with the USA's new stance based on several principles, including the need to resolve problems peacefully as well as resolving the regional security problems starting with the most crucial components, including the nuclear proliferation.

The bottom line is that in assessing how Iran has benefited from the opportunities offered by the regional and international geopolitical climate, one must take into account that the Gulf region is only part of other overlapping circles of interest which converge and intersect with US-Russian interests, in addition to other issues between the two countries including the disarmament of conventional arms. Meanwhile, any potential US-Russian conflict in the region is always described as a disciplined conflict with neither prepared to sacrifice any of their own or the other's interests and ignite wider conflict for the sake of Iran.⁽³⁴⁾

3.2. Gulf strategy for managing the conflict with Iran:

The Gulf States have pursued an integrated strategy for the management of the conflict with Iran, incorporating three mechanisms, namely:

The first mechanism, to strengthen domestic security and pursue self-sufficiency in security, this deals decisively with Iranian interference in regional nations' internal affairs through the imposition of punitive judicial verdicts against those accused of spying and linked to Hezbollah in both Kuwait and the UAE.

In terms of pursuing self-sufficiency in security, Gulf nations have already made clear progress in this field, with the GCC's joint defense agreement of 2000 leading to the establishment of the Peninsula Shield forces, which have undergone continuous development and attained experience in several stages, along with the establishment of the GCC unified military command.

The announcement of the establishment of the Gulf States Maritime Security Group 81 was an important step, not only to confront the Iranian naval threat but as a means of strengthening the defensive capabilities of the proposed Gulf Union.⁽³⁵⁾ In addition to this, work is already underway on creating a Gulf-wide missile shield. This was mentioned recently by Maj. Gen. Khalifa Hamad Al Kaabi, the Assistant Secretary-General for Military Affairs in the GCC, who said, "There is a competent

and specialized Gulf committee studying sophisticated means to protect the security of the Gulf that is though the missile shield project, but the Council may need help from allies and friendly countries in this regard, since (the project) is still in the early stages.”⁽³⁶⁾ In this context, some estimates indicate that Gulf states may need to deploy 55 Patriot missile batteries, with the possibility of six batteries of the “Thad” system and a merger between the two systems to increase efficiency in order to confront any risks posed by an Iranian missile system, with the range of Iran’s stockpile of ballistic missiles being between 200-300 kilometers for the Shahab 1 and 2, while the regime’s estimated 100 Shahab 3 missiles have a range of 1,300 to 1,600 kilometers and its Fateh 500 missile system has a range of 200 kilometers.⁽³⁷⁾

In addition to the joint military exercises between the Gulf countries, which began with the ‘Northern Thunder’ maneuvers in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and have continued through joint naval exercises between the Gulf Cooperation Council (Union 18) with the participation of the Royal Bahraini Navy and Marine weapons of the Gulf Cooperation Council and that the territorial waters of the Kingdom of Bahrain and ending with the joint exercises of (Arabian Gulf Security 1).

It is worth mentioning that the total defense spending of the Gulf Cooperation Council for the year 2015 totaled \$ 115 billion as follows: Saudi Arabia 81.9, Bahrain 1.53, 1.3 Kuwait, Oman, 3.8, 11, Qatar, the UAE and 15.8 in return Iran is spending between \$ 16 and \$ 25 billion in the same year.⁽³⁸⁾

The second mechanism, the establishment and diversification of regional and international partnerships, where Saudi Arabia announced the establishment of the Saudi – Turkish Strategic Coordination Council, and held a ministerial joint meeting for Turkish- Gulf Dialogue in Riyadh in October 2016 after a four-year break, maybe the Saudi Kingdom and the Gulf States felt that in light of plummeting confidence in the United States as a traditional partner and the weakening of the Arab regional system, they needed to partner with a regional ally with significant geopolitical weight such as Turkey to curb Iran’s growing influence in the absence of the ability of the traditional “Egypt-Syria-Iraq” triangle which would have dealt with this in the past. Turkey has been an important source of support for the Kingdom, not least because the Turkish army is the second strongest military power in NATO. In light of Turkey’s reliance on Russia and Iran to meet 80% of its energy requirements, Saudi Arabia could be an important substitute.

In addition to the Syrian crisis and the prospects for this spiraling into further chaos, with the worst scenarios representing a common challenge for both the Saudi Kingdom and Turkey.⁽³⁹⁾ At the level of international alliances despite the efforts of the Gulf states to head east, “China-India-Japan”, the Gulf states also have excellent relations with Russia and could benefit from the Russian presence in the region, which has seen the establishment of a Russian military fulcrum in Syria through its naval and air bases in Tartus.

The third mechanism, deterring Iran via the “military intervention model in Yemen,” the GCC realizes the strategic importance of Yemen, given its strategic depth for Gulf security in general and the security of the Kingdom of Saudi in particular. The Houthis declaration in September 2014 that they had entered the capital Sanaa and seized power without facing any resistance, followed by their capture of the strategic port of Hodeida later the same year posed massive challenges to the Gulf States’ national and regional security. This was underlined by the Houthis’ alliance with the Iranian regime, which has provided assistance and support on both the military and political levels, with the Houthis and Iran signing an agreement on February 28, 2015, which saw Iran, add 28 new weekly flights from Iran to Yemen. Saudi Arabia immediately realized the risks of direct Iranian presence on its southern border with Yemen and the possibility of reproducing another hostile Hezbollah-type Iranian proxy there, with the sectarian incitement having major negative repercussions on security. Yemen has massive strategic importance, given its position overlooking the Strait of Bab-el-Mandeb, a vital conduit for energy and trade, with 25,000 ships passing through this channel annually, equivalent to seven percent of the total global maritime traffic and around 40% of total world oil supply. In the event of Iran controlling the entire Strait of Hormuz from its northernmost to its southernmost point, the Gulf states would be left entirely powerless and dependent on Tehran. In the light of the collapse of the Yemeni state institutions and their inability to deal with the Houthi group following the takeover, Saudi Arabia announced the formation of an Arab coalition consisting of nine countries, namely Saudi Arabia, UAE, Kuwait, Qatar, Bahrain, Egypt, Jordan, Morocco, and Sudan, to support the legitimacy of the elected Yemeni government, with Saudi Arabia playing the biggest role in the air operations against the Houthis. These actions took place at the direct request of the Yemeni President, who asked the other Gulf States to intervene, with action supported by UN Security Council Resolution 2216, issued in April 2014 in accordance with Chapter VII of the Charter

of the United Nations.⁽⁴⁰⁾ Yemen's Red Sea coastline, which is around 1900 km long in total, is an important smuggling destination for Iranian weapons for the Houthis where Iran has rented several islands in Eritrea as fulcrums and the starting point to support the Houthis which prompted Saudi Arabia to announce its efforts of signing a military agreement with Djibouti that includes the establishment of a Saudi military base in Djibouti for the transfer the lines of defense of the national security of the Kingdom and the Gulf states outside the scope of the Yemeni crisis.⁽⁴¹⁾ Djibouti's ambassador confirmed this to the Kingdom by saying "that his country is looking forward to signing a Saudi agreement to create a Saudi military base on the territory of Djibouti."⁽⁴²⁾

Fourth: The future of the GCC-Iran conflict:

Proceeding from the complexity that characterizes the contents and paths of GCC-Iran conflict, as well as being not an instantaneous conflict but it extends across many historical periods, all the data confirm beyond any doubt that no signs of the possibility of harmony by Iran with the regional environment in accordance with the provisions of the international conventions, and therefore can talk about the three scenarios of that conflict are as follow:

4.1. Confrontational scenario (the outbreak of military confrontation)

With the intensification of the conflict in the Gulf-Iranian Currently sometimes raised the idea of direct military confrontation but that it seems unlikely, at least in the near term for several reasons:

First: Gulf states in general and Saudi Arabia does not seek military confrontation and in this context it should be noted of the Saudi Crown statement and the defense minister, Prince Mohammad Ibn Salman said, "the war between Saudi Arabia and Iran means the beginning of a major disaster in the region and it will be reflected strongly on the rest of the world. And we certainly will not allow that to happen."⁽⁴³⁾

Second: through the analysis of the previous Iranian strategies in dealing with regional conflicts we find that they still maintain their forces and capabilities for the last moment and rely on "deterrence with skepticism or deterring with doubt strategy", meaning that as long as the other party casts doubt on nature of Iran's conventional and non-conventional military capabilities, that in itself would be enough to achieve deterrence, according to the view of Iran in this regard.

Third: the outbreak of military confrontation in the Gulf region will not only be developed regionally under the containment the region on the strategic interests

of major powers, but it may require intervention on the part of those forces, and then the fundamental question is interfering with those major powers will be with or against whom? On the other hand, the interests and positions of regional countries towards the Arabian Gulf region must take into consideration and as such the confirmation of Egyptian President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi who stated, "The Arab national security and the Gulf are an integral part of Egypt's national security".⁽⁴⁴⁾ "As well as Pakistan's army chief said, "Islamabad will respond to any conspirator and any territorial threat posing to Saudi Arabia."⁽⁴⁵⁾

4.2. The conciliatory scenario (dialogue)

By analyzing Gulf official discourse, we find that the Gulf states did not oppose dialogue with Iran but Iran's hostile policies towards the Gulf states, which have led to strained relations between the two sides has been limited to those countries to put conditions or rather the requirements for such a dialogue, which for Iran to respect the sovereignty of its neighbors and non-interference in its internal affairs. If there is one possibility of a Gulf-Iranian dialogue, it must determine five key issues to have fruition.

First: The foundations of the dialogue, as the Gulf region was and still one of the most strategically important regions in the world has witnessed crises with international dimensions and the disregarding of some of the UN resolutions concerning these, including a crucial UN Security Council resolutions, No. 598, on ending the Iran-Iraq war, and another resolution, No. 2231, on the nuclear deal between Iran and the countries of the 5 + 1, with a question arising from this, viz. are these resolutions sufficient to serve as the foundations of the proposed dialogue, or is there a need for new UN resolutions that would oblige Iran to respect and follow the outcome of any such dialogue?

Second: Determining the parties to that dialogue. Although the dialogue will be bilateral between the GCC countries and Iran, it will not be separated from the overall regional issues "Yemen, Lebanon-Syria-Iraq" will be a part of this dialogue, as the Gulf States, along with the three countries of Iran, Iraq, and Yemen, pose the principal parties to regional security.

Third: Determining the objectives of the dialogue so as not to be a repeat of Iran's paradoxical rhetoric, since Iran must declare its real objective and make a paradigm shift away from the concept of "revolution" to the concept of "the state", which would mark a radical change in its policy towards the GCC countries by resolving outstanding issues.

Fourth: The timeframe for any such dialogue, whereas we find that Iran has always followed a “buying time” strategy, claiming that it needs more time to “achieve the desired results”, with this tactic giving the regime the ability to procrastinate endlessly about its nuclear programs ever since the Iranian opposition revealed details of the regime’s nuclear programs in 2002 and 2015. Iran has used its massive experience of negotiations to extend any dialogue across years if necessary, even in light of a rapidly changing regional environment, deploying this strategy as a means to promote itself as interacting positively whilst actually continuing with its regional expansionist policies and intensifying a regional cold war.

Fifth: A mandatory mechanism for implementing the dialogue outcomes. Assuming that the Gulf States and Iran will reach understandings on controversial and regional issues, there are questions over which mechanism would be used to ensure Iran’s compliance with its obligations, and over what the Gulf States’ options would be if Iran reneged on its commitments.⁽⁴⁶⁾

4.3. The continuation of the current situation “the case of push and pull.”

Where each party has been working on deploying both soft and hard power in pursuit of their objectives and to counter the adversaries’ efforts, the effectiveness of these tools is based on three factors. These are:

First: The extent of continuation of the current regional crises and how these might be reflected in any Gulf-Iranian conflict.

Second: Developments inside Iran demonstrate the close link between the Iranian foreign policy and domestic conditions, with the regime attempting to export the crisis and fabricating external crises in an effort to further complicate the situation rather than resolving these problems.

Third: The US-Russian conflict and the extent of the related implicit opportunities presented or the diktats of the restrictions imposed in the face of Iran’s regional policies show that this is the most likely scenario ahead.

Conclusion: Study results and recommendations:

Results:

1. The fundamental dilemma for Iran in its relations with the Gulf States remains the struggle between the concepts of “revolution” and “the state” with the first concept (revolution) prevailing. Amongst other consequences, this means that Iran does not comply (as it is now, nominally doing) with international conventions

which provide for state sovereignty, independence and non-interference in internal affairs of regional countries.

2. The seismic regional transformations currently taking place in neighboring countries since 2011 to date were not the sources of Iranian -Gulf tensions but simply an overt demonstration of the inevitable results of this confrontational policy, showing that Iran has not stopped and will not stop its principle of exporting the revolution, with this policy assuming a variety of forms since 1979 until now.

3. Gulf-Iranian conflict is closely linked to regional and international circles including the two superpowers, which have an influence on the content of the paths that conflict.

4. Despite the gap in the balance of power between the Gulf States and Iran, the Gulf States have been able to curb Iran's regional expansionism to some degree to date.

5. The GCC-Iran conflict reflects the fact that the Gulf region is still far from attaining full cooperative security requirements, but what is seen in the hard security indicators omits the establishment of the good neighborly relations between the countries.

Recommendations:

1. In a state of chronic aggravation taking place in neighboring countries, as well as the implications of the new US foreign policy, including the relative decline of the regional crises, there is a need for the Gulf States to accelerate the implementation of the defensive aspects of the proposed Gulf Union to achieve a regional balance of power.

2. The Gulf States must confront the Iranian regime's policies on both the regional and international scale, particularly bearing in mind the presence of a strong and active Iranian regime lobby in the USA, which has been working for several years to tarnish the image of the Gulf Arab nations and to pressurize US decision-making bodies to undermine Gulf interests.

3. There is a need to emphasize and prioritize the Gulf's central role in resolving regional crises, all of which Iran is a key player and primary aggressor in, viewing all regional conflicts as proxy confrontations with the Gulf countries. The Gulf's and the region's security and power depend on the strength of the component bodies created and maintained to defend them.

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